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## Country music and the liberal arts

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## Quad 136

### Country Music and the Liberal Arts

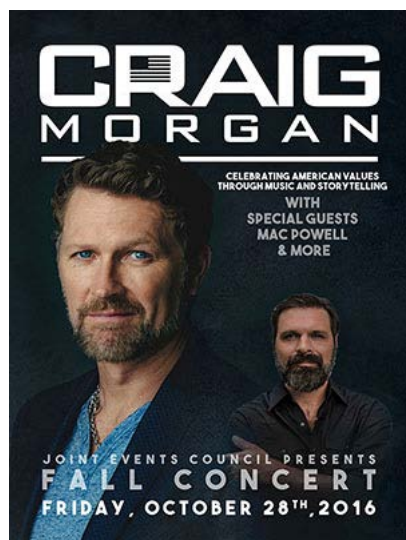
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## Country Music and the Liberal Arts

Each spring the Joint Events Council (JEC) sponsors a wildly popular concert for students at the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University and their friends. Known as **XX Pines**, where the XX is the years of the event (so this spring's event will be 17 Pines), the student run and funded JEC picks a performer or group to come to our campuses and perform.

Almost invariably I have to ask the young men working in my office to tell me something about the year's choice, as I am a hopelessly unhip middle-aged guy, but the performers are naturally selected to be known by and of interest to a wide range of our 18-22 year old students. I don't know how fraught these decisions are, not being privy to the discussions and negotiations, but it is not surprising that the usual artists are what can broadly be called "pop" musicians. (I know that is probably an insult to performers, but too bad.) The three most recent performers on campus for JEC sponsored concerts were Nico & Vinz, Timeflies and Andy Grammer. (Just to defend my honor, I should state that I had actually heard of more than one of these.)

But here is a fact that says something interesting and maybe even important about CSB and SJU. Because these concerts have become so popular, the JEC will sponsor a fall concert this weekend. The performer will be Craig Morgan, a country singer (that I had not heard of).



This selection caught me a little by surprise because, based on 30+ years in the academic world, I had come to believe that college students generally thought of country music as tragically unhip. I had assumed that if the JEC was selecting a performer for our campuses and "pop" was not the chosen genre, that the next options would be alternative or hip hop or blues or world music. I never imagined that country would make the cut.

Now the first hypothesis I considered was that there are a lot more country music fans on our campus than I had imagined. I do suspect we have a lot more country fans than other campuses I am familiar with, but I think this choice reveals that something more important is going on here.

There are three things that a country concert at CSB and SJU suggest to me:

1. We have a very diverse community of students—diverse in ways that are not necessarily obvious to the naked eye. Diverse musical tastes might well serve as a proxy for other important kinds of diversity—political, world view, family background,

geographic, etc.

2. We have generous, thoughtful students in our community. Regardless of the actual number of country music fans on campus, I think it is not a stretch to say that they are not a majority and would not even be a plurality. If students voted on their single favorite music genre, I believe that country would come in no better than 4th or 5th, depending on how one classified genres. Therefore, the student decision makers on the JEC, who presumably try to reflect the views of the broader student body, decided that it was the right thing to do to bring a country singer to campus because there is a significant number of country fans whose interest had not be met in previous choices. Rather than going for the natural, and easy, pop choice, they reached out to that minority of country fans and made an inclusive choice.
3. We have open-minded, intellectually curious liberal arts students on our campuses. As the JEC made their decision, they surely had to consider how the large majority of non-country fans would react to their choice, since they were spending their student activity fee dollars and turnout at these events matters. It appears that they had confidence that their peers would be supportive of this choice. They clearly believed that the turnout would merit the costs and energy that would be required for this show. Specifically, they believed that lots of non-country fans would be interested enough to go to the show to support their country loving peers and to have a musical experience that they would typically have.

Maybe I am reading too much into this, but I think this concert and the events leading up to it say something important about the CSB/SJU community, about our hospitable, welcoming, open-minded and intellectually curious ethos.

As we approach an election that has been decidedly lacking in these characteristics, I think this is cause for hope and makes me proud to be sending such Johnnies and Bennies into the world.

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By [Michael Hemesath](#) | October 28th, 2016 | Categories: [Kudos](#) | [0 Comments](#)

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## About the Author: [Michael Hemesath](#)

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Michael Hemesath is the 13th president of Saint John's University. A 1981 SJU graduate, Hemesath is the first layperson appointed to a full presidential term at SJU. You can find him on Twitter [at] [PrezHemesath](#).